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The Attic

Douglas J. Alford

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THE ATTIC

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As a writer of poetry, I am often subject to voices. They invade my unconscious mind, like rude tourists who have gone out for a swim in the deeper waters and then find themselves drowning. And they cry out for saving, three times (just like in the cartoons), then they sink through the depths until they are gone. But on occasion I take a fancy to a dying plea. I find myself a tablet, a ballpoint pen, and a quiet place to sit. I plunge the pen, point-first, into the murky waters, stabbing the little blue-faced swimmer through the gut, and I drop him, dripping ink and imagery, onto the dry sheet of paper. He is usually grateful (though sometimes he dies immediately), and thanks me by singing in his most beautiful voice as I scribble his words. Too late to matter, he notices the wound in his abdomen and the blood on the page, then quietly fades. Something like this scenario is called "inspiration." Something else like this scenario is called "madness." On one night in coldest February, one year ago today, I leaned over the icy water and prepared to poke a swimmer in the belly. Out of the sea burst a monster. And it swallowed me whole.

Sycophant worm with a marshmallow perm,
Tell me your secrets and spit me your germ.

And the voice stopped there. Sitting on the couch in my basement den, I listened to the gurgling of the fish tank and waited for more. But there was no more, so after several minutes I tried adding something on my own. I wrote another couplet, then crossed it out. The voice had gone. But that was normal, so I decided to get myself some coffee and work on revising another poem. I sat down on the couch, sipped the coffee, and leaned back, closing my eyes. A vision enveloped me.

In my mind's eye, like a dream but with the clarity of reality, I saw a room. It was an attic, with an A-framed ceiling, and my perspective was that of an owl, perched on one of the frames. The attic was huge. The floor was carpeted, and there was one little room in the far right corner which I took to be the bathroom because of the crescent moon painted on its door. Directly in front of me was a drafting table, which held a tablet of drawing paper and a box of pencils. In the near right corner was a bookshelf, with hundreds of volumes stacked neatly, and in front of the

bookshelf was a television, which sat dark, cobwebs running from it to the table it sat upon. It would be an understatement to say that the walls were painted. The ceiling of the Sistine Chapel shows no such detail. There were scenes beside scenes, scenes inside of scenes, scenes filled with such intricate detail that to look closely required the same concentration one would use to read a thick novel. But the room was dimly lit, so I turned my attention to the left end of the attic, where the only opening to the outside world, a louvered vent, admitted the moonlight. In front of the vent was a bare-topped desk, and in a chair, facing the vent, sat an old man. And he spoke.

"It is not quite midnight, but the flickering flame of the daytime wind has been snuffed by the stillness of the dark hour. I wax nostalgic, here in my attic, suppressing my desires and sniffing the air."

Just then, a breeze rattled the slats. The old man raised his head to peer through them.

"Esmeralda, is that you? Is that your name? Or Penelope, or Juniper, or Maria, or Klaus? Have you returned to my lonely cave? Or have you forgotten me? Aren't you the one who tried to snort the cinnamon from the pie on the sill? Didn't you blow in my ear on a warm August night? Aren't you the skirt-blower, chain-rattler, drier of tears, who blew up a donkey's ass and flew out his ears? No. Heaven knows Hell like I know your name, frosty tart. You are Cassiopa, and you won't break my heart."

The old man was silent for a moment. He leaned back, combing his fingers through a mass of tousled, white hair. Then he stood, and I saw he wore a painter's smock and dark blue pajama bottoms. His feet were bare. As he stepped around the chair, I could make out his features. He was tall and somewhat awkward. His face was thin and German, framed by the anarchy of that white hair, and a pair of granny glasses rested on the end of his nose. As I studied him, he turned his gaze upward, and with eyes green and vaporous, eyes haunted and haunting, eyes that captured and meant to hold me until the last word had been spoken, he stared directly at me.

"My name is Claudius Ionesco Van Buren. There is no need for you to introduce yourself, because I am the one who summoned

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you. I am sorry to have imprisoned you here, but, as you will note, I am not the keeper of the key."

To prove his point, he walked to a trap door in the center of the floor and pulled on its handle. It would not open. He stood, a toothy grin spreading wide his face.

"Welcome to my world. Won't you come on in?"

It is difficult to say whether the cry that escaped me was a reaction to the hot coffee that spilled over the edge of the cup that rested on my stomach or to the image that had burned itself onto the backs of my eyelids. No matter. I did cry out, and the sound was echoed by footsteps on the floor above. My wife, Angela, had heard, and as she opened the door to the basement I found my mind racing. Had I gone insane? Had the chemicals in my brain become so bored with this reality that they had marshalled themselves and marched over to a new set of synaptic pathways to try something different? And should I tell anyone? The bubbles that percolated in my gut said No! as they burst, one after the other. No! No! No! "It's nothing," I said. "I just spilled some coffee." And I stood there, alone, a prisoner, just as the old man, Claudius, had said, in a cell of fear and self-doubt.

Angela seemed satisfied with my response, and told me that she was going to bed, and would I please shut off the lights when I was through? "Yes," I said. "No problem." And the door closed. No problem? I had a very significant problem, but it was one that offered me no obvious solution, so I sat down on the couch, the fish tank blubbing and humming in my ears, and spoke softly. "Go ahead, old man. Have your way with me." And I closed my eyes.

"Welcome back, friend. I hope you don't mind my calling you friend. I mean I feel a bit familiar, hanging out with my familiar and all. 'And all!' What a wonderfully vague, inclusive phrase that is. It begets mystery, or misery, or Mister Tree, whose knobby arms have been known to play footstool to a hoot-owl or two. Have you noticed? It's not just your perspective. Look at your arms, boy! They're featherous!"

Claudius cackled horribly and danced around the room. I looked down, and, indeed, where arms should have been I saw wings. But

when I lifted my arm in the reality of my basement, there was no corresponding movement of my form in the attic. And when I grunted in frustration, no sound came from my beak. Claudius was delighted.

"Allow me to assist you! Who! Who! Who! Who! Yes. And why? You must be wondering, so perhaps I should explain myself. Quoth the Strigidae, tell me more. You are here, my dear, my joke, my fear, to lend your ear to a sparky old lad who's gone quite mad. Who am I? Well. I am a poet of sorts. Sort of. But of what sorts am I? The sort of sorts that sorts the shorts on sporting courts and spills the beans on legal torts? Or perhaps the sort that lost the fort, was forced to abort, and pray to the lord? God, that's awful. Let me try again, in a more measured form. It's not so easy, you know, to hang on to your words in an attic that's been your home for 3, 4 ... I can't remember any more ... 5, 6 ... The mind plays tricks ... 7, 8 ... Hold on, wait! ... 9, 10 ... Let me start again. No! 7 years. That's right. Righty-tighty, lefty-loosey. Or was that goosey-Lucy behind the sprucey?"

Stop. Stop, I thought. If this was all this was going to be about, the childish word-games of an idiot haunting my brain, then certainly I was going insane. Maybe I was dead, and had been assigned to the specific hell designed for vain poets. I could not be sure of much of anything at this moment, but I knew I would not sit passively and endure this any longer. With no reason around me, I acted out of the only truth I could grasp, anger. I began to knock my head against the concrete wall behind me. Claudius's expression turned from glee, to sobriety, to panic.

"No," he cried. "Please stop! I'm sorry! I'm sorry!" And as he dropped to his knees, I banged my head faster, and harder. I wanted him dead. A numb darkness began to creep around my eye sockets. Claudius stood up, and shouted, "I promise redemption! I promise!" I stopped.

"Please. I do not mean to hurt you. I brought you here for only one reason. To listen to me. For too long only these walls have played witness to my dancing, and the oils that painted the rhythms of my music, sometimes silence, sometimes cacophony, are nearly used up. You are here to save those walls from whitewash. Don't take my fun from me, please. I am

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simply lonely in this attic. If I seem to be playing games with you it is only because the game for so long has been *solitaire*. I am Robinson Crusoe and you are Friday, on a Saturday night, playing cards, creating rhymes, and glancing occasionally at the horizon. But there ain't no ship of reason a-coming, companion. And we are not free to leave. I am not an idiot. I am an Id. And my ego has been dashed to pieces on the floor of this attic, through which I hear the mumblings of the natives below. Let me tell you what the Cook, that schnook, told the Maid, whom he laid, on the third-floor staircase just below:

"Listen. Master Van Buren has informed me that a few of his friends are going to be spending the night here Christmas Eve. We must prepare to serve them breakfast in the guests' quarters. Which also means we'll have to silence that madman in the attic. I suggest we use tranquilizers, a gag for his mouth, straps for binding his legs, and handcuffs. Better yet, perhaps a few diazepam tablets in his daily milkshake will quiet the old fool. Remember, although you have been employed here for only a month, you have been entrusted with guarding a dark secret of the Van Buren family. You are not to speak of the old man to anyone. Now I believe it is time for us to prepare deviled eggs for the children's brunch and make love in the restroom. Are we agreed?"

"He is a man of cold vision and flavorless words, that Cook. And the Maid is a minimalist. This was her answer:

"Okay."

"Ah, but the beauty of that word! Okay! OK. Ostrich kippers. Oleo king. Officer Kramer! Opulent ketchup. Orangutan kiss. Om ka. Ommm kaaa. Ommmmkaaaa. I've taken up chanting this winter. It's slightly more clarifying than shouting love sonnets at the spiders, if not quite as gratifying, and it keeps the mind wasp at bay for hours at a time. Hours that might otherwise be spent dancing the tarantella around stingers in the furnace of hornets. Hours of great paradoxisms in the mentinental plates, throwing up mountains of syntactical dirt between the equi-valiant planes of existence that someone like myself and someone like yourself stand upon. We are two lonely pieces of the same puzzle. We got soul. Hunh! Get down! Don't let it confuse you. All I'm really saying is, it's our parity, and I'll cry if

I want to."

With a wave of his freckled, bony fingers, Claudius dismissed me. He turned and walked slowly over to the wall, where he sat down. And as I watched him tracing the outlines of a painting with his finger, the vision slowly faded to black. I opened my eyes, becoming aware of the throbbing pain in my head. I decided I might benefit from a glass of wine and an aspirin or two, so I went upstairs.

I sipped the wine as I wandered the house. Angela was in our bed, her mouth open, giving a labored tone to her breathing as she clutched my pillow. Redemption, Claudius? I thought. Yours, or mine? How many nights have I seen my wife like this, alone, asleep, after I have spent hours struggling to write something of value, something important, something better than all of us? In unconscious answer to my question, Angela sighed heavily and rolled over. She was beautiful, and she deserved more than the man I was. Those bright, wonderful eyes, those tender lips, that perfectly-shaped shoulder gently tugging at the strap of her nightgown, the almost painfully honest and vulnerable love she offered should have haunted me, should have inspired my strongest desire. I did love her, as much as was possible for me. But I was haunted by something else, by the voice inside of me that said "Write. You are capable of greatness." And my desire to make that true was in constant battle with the smaller, yet deeply resonant voice that said "Lose yourself in her love." Lose myself? Then who will be great? Then, suddenly, the distance between myself and the bed, the gap between her and me, felt like a chasm, and I put my hand on the wall to keep my balance.

Down the hall, in the room with clowns on the walls, slept 3-year-old Arabella and 7-year-old Daphne, whose lives were still transcendent, whose joys were as honest as their pains, whose angers and awes were as pure as their dreams must have been. What do you have to fear from love? their sleeping faces seemed to ask, as I pulled their kicked-off blankets up around them. I fear losing the voice, I might have said. I fear oblivion.

In the kitchen, I emptied the wine glass and took out the bottle to pour some more. With a sense of resignation, I left the glass on the counter and carried the bottle downstairs.

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The basement waited for me like an unfinished dream. I took a long drink and bent over to peer into the fish tank. Zebra danios zipped across the top of the tank, pursued by their bully leader. Oriental guppies drifted in their inscrutable way, and the single black molly, Violet, wriggled her way up from the bottom until she was directly in front of my nose, and, with what had to be the closest possible thing to a fish smile, said, "Sit down. I have good news." My head spinning, I sunk into the couch and set the bottle by my leg. My eyes closed and there was Claudius, waving frantically, his face ecstatically lit.

"Look! Look! Over in the corner! A small bright one staring up at me! A squirrel! My God, a beautiful creature! Don't be frightened, little Chip. Come! Have a bit of toast, a piece of hard-boiled egg. There you go! Oh, yes, wondrous friend. Nibble all you want. There will be plenty more at breakfast. My lord, companion, see what we have here! A friend, a hope, at long last a friend. This fuzzy little Puck has invigorated me, has sent a warm shower of honey through my internals, has brung me alive! I think I am in love."

A hope. A friend. I found to my surprise that I was also invigorated, also filled with a warm rain that began to erode the repulsion and cold dread that had characterized my encounter with the old man. The squirrel was beautiful, like a child. I sat and watched while Claudius lured it closer with bits of food. I watched for what might have been an hour as he stroked the animal's fur and spoke gently. And like a warm blanket, the vision began to make me drowsy. I opened my eyes and saw that it was almost 2 a.m. I took another drink of the wine and lay down. The squirrel was on Claudius's leg, its eyes nearly closed, making tiny chirping noises.

"I am tired, too, companion. The stillness outside is reflected in my heart, and the fire in my head (flames stoked by that bitch, Cassiopa) is being smothered as we speak. What's that, little Chip? Ah, I see. The squirrel has corrected my speciocentric language, and I am most ashamed. Make that 'smothered as we squeak.' I am tired. We shall sleep."

I slept, and I dreamt. In my dream I saw before me a vast darkness, and outstretched in the darkness was my arm, and in my hand

was a round object, indefinable, a globe of pure mass, asking for and receiving no name. The object cleaved in the center, and unfolded itself, forming the shape of a bowl, or goblet. And in my dream I knew that the movement of the object was a metaphor for the mind of man, a simple and perfect statement of human existence. I awoke, but when I tried to remember the meaning of the vision all I could remember was the metamorphosis of the thing, the visual image. I picked up a tablet and a pen, but this wonderful revelation fled from words like a butterfly fleeing a net. It defied the pin of the collector. With a sigh, I put down the tablet and leaned back in the couch, my eyes closed.

"Wake up! Wake up! There are wonders to behold! Marvels to be held! Stories to be told! You must excuse me. I am sorry about your dream, but I haven't the time to discuss such mundanity right now. Let it suffice to say that you have just now experienced the truth of our internment. This dreadful attic has walls that are made of verbiage. Words are your prison, companion, and in your captivity you find yourself playing rhyming and rhythming games, just as I have found myself painting meaningless pictures. Remember your anger at my senseless word-play earlier? Perhaps you will understand if I now permit myself a chuckle born of irony, seeing you thus, as an echolalic owl, who-whoing about in the rafters. But do not despair, companion! I promised redemption and the squirrel has delivered! He has traveled to the outside world, beyond these walls, underneath Cassiopa's pointy, warted nose! While we have been dumbly asnooze our little savior has been adventuring! Has been questing through the night! Our buck-toothed Jason has returned with the fleece! Green it is, but it glows with sacred power. A fir branch! Our Christmas tree. I am aware of its smallness, but let us be fair. Little Chip's shoulders could not have borne much more weight. And is tremendous size a requisite for tremendous worth? Consider the fabled Christ-child. How big was he? And we must figure perspective into the equation. A star may be held on the tip of a finger, but it was a supernova that played road-map for those wise men. And I would venture to say that this scaly-smooth stick, with these lustrous green prickly-blades sprouting from its

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heart, its center, its meaty-wet Zen ka, its core, has brung me more pleasure than any five-inch thing has ever brung anyone. It will be Christmas in our attic! I am the shepherd, and the squirrel is Gabriel! I am enraptured! I am enjoyed! I am overjoyed! I am overwhelmed! Let us be frank. I am incensed."

Claudius turned away from me, the branch in his hand, and began wandering around the attic, looking for, I now know, a tree-stand of some sort. The vision faded. I opened my eyes and looked at the clock. It was 5:30 and I was still exhausted. As I climbed the steps I smiled, thinking of the old man and the squirrel, preparing for Christmas in the middle of my February, gathered around a propped-up twig, maybe singing carols together. As I climbed into bed, I began giggling like a child. Angela stirred, then opened her eyes. "What?" she said, smiling. "What's so funny?" "You," I said, laughing. She sighed, and leaned over to kiss me. I kissed her back. And we made love.

Later, when I woke up I smelled bacon, and I could hear the girls playing dolls in their room. Angela called from the kitchen, "Are you getting up? Breakfast is almost ready." I swung my legs out over the edge of the bed and sat up, but when I rubbed my eyes with my palms I saw Claudius in there, waving his hand. "Give me a few minutes," I answered. "I'll be out."

"I am sorry to have disturbed you at this hour, companion, but I think that you will forgive me. I have something to discuss. Do you see the joy spread before you? I have poked a hole in this cigar box and erected our tree. Is it not beautiful? We are gathering presents, my long-tailed friend and I, to place beneath it. Little Chip has carried in an acorn and some kind of mint plant, which I will boil in water and apply to my eversore feet. Just the thing for my aching corns! From the attic I have gathered a hairbrush, a whole hard-boiled egg, and my reading glasses. I thought that little Chip might enjoy a trip to Dizzyland now and then. And the glasses are useless to me now! I am seeing more clearly than I have ever seen. There is no longer any need to spend my time painting postage stamps on the walls. I can abandon my treatise on the esthetics of spiders' webs as they relate to splinters in roof beams and knotholes in paneling. There is a huge not-hole in my consciousness, a whole-whole, a center. The thoughtpaths there may go

unwalked. The wasp is quieting its buzzing, and the furnace cools. Cassiopa, that whirling, swirling, nauseating, dancing whore, speaks only in a whisper. My hands have stopped their shaking. And I have a friend, a real friend, to talk to."

He was quiet for a moment. I heard light footsteps moving down the hall towards my room, but I held my palms over my eyes and sat, waiting for Claudius to continue.

"Which brings me to your present, dear companion. For too long you have been a prisoner here with me, enduring my tirades, decoding my riddles. And for too long you have believed that my craziness, my obsession, my sickness, was your own. It was not. You are a man, companion, not an owl, and not a mad genius. You don't have to be. You live in the world of man, not Rasputin's attic. And you will do fine there. I am setting you free. I only ask that you remember me now and again, when the sky darkens, or when Cassiopa's quiet breath stirs the wind chimes on the porch. Farewell, companion. Now be with your family."

And then, behind my eyelids, beneath my palms, there was nothing. For a few seconds I tried to bring the vision back, but the only thing left was cloudy memory and incomplete imagination. I heard breathing in front of me, so I lifted my head and opened my eyes. Arabella stood there, a look of concern on her face. "Daddy, you crying?" "No," I laughed, though my cheeks were wet. "Daddy's OK." I winked at her. "It's just you and me now, kid." She smiled in acknowledgement of the playfulness she saw. "Daddy," she said, "you're weirdo."

As I walked down the hall, with Arabella's soft and tiny hand enclosed in mine, I felt free. The voice in my head was no longer chattering; no drowning swimmers broke the surface of the clear lake that ebbed and flowed behind my eyes. There was still a song in my heart, but the vocal had become a wordless Turkish wailing, continuous, unbroken by syntactical diversions and rhyming tangents. I stood on the line of the song and could see that it had a beginning, though it was lost now on the horizon of vanished memory, and I knew that it had an ending, towards which I now paced steadily backwards, though I would not see it until it worked its way out from under my feet. But I was not afraid, because the line was

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straight, and easy to walk.

Breakfast, it turned out, was burning, due to its sticking to the surface of one of those non-stick pans, so with a happy "Screw it!" I invited my family to a breakfast out, to a restaurant whose atmosphere had been designed to emulate Granny's kitchen, whether your granny could cook or not, where "they" made the food, "they" brought it to you, and "they" washed the dishes afterwards. Well, we deserved it, damn it, every once in a while. Soon we were all gobbling french toast and syrup, giggling at each other, making faces at the waitress when her back was turned, flicking drops of syrup at each other, just loving each other the way a good family sometimes does. Angela, with an expression that somehow managed to combine the elements of a smile and a frown, held her fork out in front of the kids and said, "Hey! There's a spot on my butter knife! Who's in charge here? Where's the cook?" She began to tap the end of the fork on the table in syncopation with the words, "Where's-the-cook? Where's-the-cook? Where's-the-cook?" Daphne and Arabella quickly caught on, tapping their own silverware, and I too joined in. Until a cold snake tapped on my heart and slithered its way down around my esophagus, wrapping itself about my stomach and giving a little squeeze. The Cook? I thought of Claudius.

For the rest of the day I managed to muffle the dull metallic sound of dread, drowning it out with the new sound, the hum of existential movement that felt like freedom. I played ball with the children in the park, no thoughts of "What does the ball represent? ... When will the game end? ... Am I guilty of something? ... Of what?" Just a ball, a toss, a smile. But as the day came to its end, and I lay there in bed next to Angela, I knew that I was going to have to deal with it. Had the Cook carried out his terrible plan? Did Claudius now sit, bound in his chair, unconscious, with a bit of milkshake running down his chin? Or did it matter? Strangely, the vision that had seemed so much like reality when I experienced it now seemed unreal—fully and vividly remembered, but unreal, hardened and painted in oil, like a story one has read a long time ago. Had it really had anything to do with me at all? I closed my eyes.

The attic was there. Claudius was

there. A thin stream of blood ran down his right temple from a wound on his forehead and pooled in the wrinkles that emanated from the corner of one sunken eye. He sat in the middle of the floor, staring straight ahead, hands clasped in front of him, his body gently rocking. Beside him was a blanket, folded neatly once over, and between the folds was a lump. My heart sank.

"I am sorry to have called you back, companion. I had no intention of doing so. But I have need for your ear once again. Twice again might be too many. A bad thing, a terrible bad thing has occurred in your absence. It is far too, maybe three or four, much for me to bear alone. Does a bear shit in the woods? Only if it hears a tree falling. Do you understand the Fall? Did Satan fall from the heavens like a rainstorm into the forest? And did he knock over the tree, the tree that makes no sound, that tree? And did he fall on me? I do not know.

"Little Chip is dead, and it's Christmas Eve.

"I think I don't need anyone to talk with right now."

I lay there for a long time, staring at the ceiling, nursing the cold nausea that enveloped me. My stomach vibrated and flipped like a fish dying on the shore. The hand of urgency gripped me. This weird dream had turned into a meaningful nightmare and I had to figure it out. Who are you, Claudius? You promised me redemption, but redemption from what sin? Is it sloth that needs to die? Should I be writing right now? I am too sick to write. Is it greed? Do I want too much from my life? Or is it conceit? I have believed myself capable of greatness. And my family has paid a price for my devotion to that belief. And what about your son, your ignorant jailer? Is he a part of me, the part that has imprisoned you, my free-dancing spirit, in a mental attic with walls that, as you said, represent words—rhyming words, meaningless games? Was it the ego of your son that made me try to destroy you when you first took over? Am I afraid of your crazy dancing, afraid that I might disappear as a dignified genius if I set you free to wander in Cassiopa's domain, the wild unknown, the outside world? Am I afraid of the embarrassment, the derisive laughter, the judgmental stares, the criticism others might inflict if they saw my progenitive

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self sniffing flowers on the open ground? Am I afraid of you? Or am I afraid of me?

The squirrel was dead. The messenger from the outside, who promised and delivered hope, was now a lump under a blanket, slain by a servant sent by the son to shut the old man up. And I was the son. My stomach churned violently. I jumped out of bed and ran to the bathroom to vomit. And when there was finally nothing left in me to eject, I leaned back against the tub and hugged my knees and closed my eyes. Claudius was looking up at me with a green fire in his eyes. His voice was calm and his words were rational.

"Listen. Listen. Put your fear and self-loathing aside. You bear no blame for what has happened here. I brought you here, remember? And I did so for a reason, though it was not clear even to me, until now, what that reason might be. I am not mourning Puck's demise any longer. I have beaten back the dogs of sadness! I have whipped them with the raw hide of purpose! I am back, Cassiopa, you yowling, howling, blizzard-breathing wench! That's right. I have seen through the vent in my attic that it is snowing. It is Christmas morning, and I'm feeling much better than when last we talked. Which reminds me, sometimes blinds me, always binds me, never minds me, I have not yet told you what happened to the squirrel. Here it is:

"After you left us, Chip and I chirped gossip at each other for awhile, until we grew weary and lay down together to sleep. I awoke to the sound of the Cook speaking to the maid on the landing below. This is what he said:

"The guests are going to be here in an hour. I may need your help forcing this drugged milkshake down the old man's throat. If he gives us any trouble, I will hold him while you pour it in his mouth. Don't worry. He's not strong enough to hurt you. It's just that he's mad, and not very agreeable. The ladder to the attic is right up here. Follow me."

"And the delightfully verbose Maid said this:

"All right."

"I knew I did not have much time, so I quickly shoed the squirrel into a corner, grabbed a broom, and placed it beside me where I sat in this chair next to the vent. I waited patiently for the Cook to open the trap door, and when he had entered, with the Maid behind

him, I pretended to be as loony as they believed me to be. I sang a song from a cartoon I had seen as a child:

Oh, I wish I were a walrus,
In the sunny fields of Spain!
Please pass the ketchup,

I think it's going to rain! Which prompted the Cook to say, 'See? I told you he was mad.'

"But the Maid, bless her heart, said, 'But he seems nice enough. And look! He's made himself a little Christmas tree, with presents and everything. Why don't we leave him alone?'

"Whereupon I promptly exposed myself, leapt to my feet, and licked her on the eye. She backed up quickly, and I spun around to grab the broom handle. But the Cook was fast. He whisked the broom out of my grasp and held it in his right hand, the milkshake still in his left. With murder in his eyes, he brandished the broom. But then something caught his attention. It was little Chip, clawing wildly at the floorboards. The Cook flew toward the squirrel, but I threw myself in front of him, knocking us both to the floor. The tainted milkshake splattered us both. The Cook jumped to his feet, screaming, 'Goddamn it!' The Cook is insane. He struck me on the head with the broom handle, which left me unable to move, though I still retained consciousness. I watched through blurry pain as he clubbed little Chip to death.

"May he rest in pieces."

My heart raced. Claudius pointed a finger, and with a word, "Fly!," released me from my paralysis in the dream world. I stretched out my wings and beat them hard against the air. I lifted from the roof beam and flew around the room, circling him as his intensity exploded.

"Yes, fly! I will fly, too! The pain has given me strength! I am impervious, impertinent, impulsive, improper, just basically an all-around imp! I have arisen from my death-watch with a new leash on life!"

Claudius reached under the fold of the blanket and lifted Puck's lifeless body to his chest. He dug his fingers into the squirrel's wounds, then smeared the blood on his forehead and cheeks in broad lines. He carefully set the body on the floor, then snatched up the broom and began smashing the slats of the louvered

THE ATTIC

Douglas J. Alford

vent. When these were in pieces, he picked up the chair and hurled it through the screened-in opening. I shrieked an owl's shriek and landed on his shoulders as he mounted the edge of the sill. Claudius howled into the cold sky, "Ho! Ho! Ho! Merry Christmas! I am Santa Claus and the wind is my sleigh! Ho! Ho! Ho!"

I looked down. There were three floors below us. Balconies jutted out from the second and third floors. On the closest balcony stood a young couple, staring up at us in horror. On the ground stood the Cook and the Maid, half-dressed. And on the balcony between them stood the son, his hands tightly framing a face I knew. I extended my wings and with a heavy stroke I pushed off. The force of the takeoff knocked Claudius off balance. He hurtled to the ground. Catching the wind, I circled, drifting slowly down to Claudius's crumpled form. His face was pressed into the snow. He opened his eyes, and spoke in a tender, feeble voice.

"Imagine that, companion. No sleigh. I thought, just a moment ago, when I opened my eyes, that we were seeing an early thaw,

because the snow was melting. But now I notice that the house is melting also. And the trees. What's that, Cassiopa? You want me now? Well, you always were a pretty lady. Don't forget what the Buddha says, companion. Nothing ever dies. Merry Christmas, companion. Merry Christmas, friend. And thank you. Thank you." When I saw the fire fade from his eyes, I shrieked again, and I flew. I was above the trees, and I beat my wings hard as I headed toward the horizon.

I opened my eyes in the bathroom. Angela stood in front of me, a look of shock on her face. Behind her, Daphne wrinkled her brow. And behind them both, giggling with delight, stood Arabella. When I realized that I was flapping my arms, I stopped. Then, I couldn't help it, I began to giggle, too. Daphne's brow relaxed, and she quickly joined in. She flapped her own arms. "We're birds!" she cried. "We're birds!" And with Angela behind us, grinning, "You're crazy is what you are," we flew down the hall.

— Douglas J. Alford

LETTER FROM THE CO-EDITOR

I need to take a moment to thank certain parties who helped make this happen. First off, the illustrators did a beautiful job. Shannon especially helped since she was here to bail me out. The writers too were incredibly receptive, dedicated, and willing to make two and three revisions. Gwenyth was patient and understanding with the co-editor's other obligations. And, lastly, to the Mythopoeic Society without whose financial wings, this magazine would never have flown.

I would also like to encourage subscribers and contributors to spread the news of Mythic Circle's return. We are non-profit and can not depend wholly on the Society to support us. Also don't forget to mail letters of advice and encouragement for your fellow

writers. This magazine is designed specifically for this function.

Finally, I'd like to note the MC's broadening of the definition of what is mythic. The editors are interested not only in ancient myth but the myths that sprout up around us, even today. It is important for us notice not only the myths that have existed for millennia but the myths that bloom in our backyard gardens. Observe carefully the variety of poems and stories in our current issue. Not only do some of these make contemporary the myths of yesterday, but some, like Schomburg's poems and Vollant's story, create all new myths from today's world. We hope, in the future, to receive all types.

Thanks for reading.

Sincerely,
Trent M. Walters